

‘A Spartacus of Africa’, featuring the original music of Khachaturian, opens at the Port Elizabeth Opera House on 2 November. Renowned choreographer, Veronica Paeper, has re-designed her original ballet to incorporate contemporary dance and classical ballet - a first for South Africa. This production was made possible by a grant of R949 000.00 from the National Lotteries Commission (NLC).

It’s long been Paeper’s ambition to reproduce this ballet - arguably her finest. Drawn to the similarity between Rome’s treatment of their captives and the many down-trodden peoples in Africa, Paeper has given the ballet a mythical African slant, naming it... **A Spartacus of Africa.**

The South African National Dance Trust (SANDT) is thrilled to bring this romantic and dynamic two-act ballet to the Port Elizabeth Opera House after successful seasons in Johannesburg and Cape Town. It will inspire new audiences with its unique form of collaborative dance styles.

The story is about slaves fighting for freedom, Spartacus’s deep love for his wife Phrygia and Aegina’s guile helping her lover, Crassus, to squash the revolt. The tale makes ideal material for an exciting ballet and love story calling for a technically strong cast able to act.

Twenty-two of SA’s most exciting and talented dancers, who were auditioned nationally, form the cast, which includes Eastern Cape dancers.

Nelson Mandela’s fight for freedom for which he and others were prepared to die, links to the message behind Spartacus. It is also relevant to several states in Africa. Innovative set designs capturing the spirit of Africa were created by KMH Architects, whilst ingenious costumes by the acclaimed designer Dicky Longhurst allow the athleticism of the dancers to be vividly dramatized.

A key element of SANDT’s strategy is to include local communities in as many aspects of the production as possible and to mentor up-and-coming talent. Part of the set was constructed by a group of Masiphumulelo women plaiting thousands of recycled green plastic bags into vines. Another project involved City Varsity students filming an educational documentary about bringing a ballet of this magnitude to the stage. The eight minute DVD illustrates the diverse disciplines involved and forms an inspiring introduction for previously disadvantaged learners who attend the final dress rehearsal at each theatre.

The role of Spartacus (Amari) is danced by Casey Swales from Durban, Crassus (Nagash) – his enemy – by Johannesburg-based Xola Willie and the female leads by Kristin Wilson and Elzanne Crause, currently based in Cape Town.

Spartacus - the Thracian gladiator who escaped in 73 BC to lead a major slave uprising against the Roman Empire - has inspired revolutionaries, politicians and writers ever since then. The fact that he was defeated in no way detracts from his courage and that of his fellow slaves, in pitting themselves against mighty Roman legionaries led by the General, Crassus.

It's a tale that, finding favour with the communist regime, saw Leonid Yokobson choreograph a three-act production for Kirov Ballet in 1956. In 1968 Yuri Grigorovich choreographed his version for Bolshoi Ballet. Both accounts use Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian's superb score, as did Veronica Paeper for her 1984 CAPAB Spartacus production.

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Promising to be a dynamic spectacle, the opening night performance on 2 November will be a first major dance production for Port Elizabeth's newly renovated and beautiful Opera House. The season runs until 6 November. Ticket prices range from R100 – R220 with group discounts available. Booking through Computicket.

NOTE TO EDITORS:

Photographs by Claire Gunn feature Casey Swales as Spartacus.

RELEASED BY:

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